A LITTLE NIGHT MUSIC
May 20, 2007

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 97
Acts 16:16–34

"About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying
and singing hymns to God,
and the prisoners were listening to them."
Acts 16:25 (NRSV)

Socrates taught us that a life without thinking is not worth living. Now, thinking is a noble effort, but the finest thinking may end in futility. In thinking, we are left to ourselves: We may soar into astral space and proclaim the finest thoughts; yet what will be the echo and what will be its meaning for the soul? The Bible teaches us that life without commitment is not worth living. . . . Our commitment is to God.

Abraham Joshua Heschel
I Asked for Wonder

I wonder what they were singing, Paul and Silas, sitting there in the dark, at midnight, their feet in chains? What was the little night music with which they favored the inmates of that miserable jail in the Macedonian city of Philippi?

Author James Carroll, who at the time was a Roman Catholic priest, wrote the foreword for William Sloane Coffin's last book, *Credo*:

> A steel wall separated your cramped space from that of the man in the adjoining cell of the D. C. lockup. It was an overnight incarceration after being arrested for trespassing at the U.S. Capitol. The year was 1972. In the cell block, in separate cells, were another two dozen prisoners who had been part of an antiwar demonstration.

Carroll remembers how eerily quiet it was and dark, how he had been raised and educated as a priest to respect authority, and how disoriented he felt—and alone and afraid—in jail.

He recalls:

> Even now you have no idea what prompted him to do so, but at some point in that night, the man in the next cell began to sing, softly at first. His resolute baritone gradually filled the air as he moved easily into the lyric of what you soon recognized as Handel's *Messiah:* "Comfort, comfort, ye my people." You recognized the voice as that of William Sloane Coffin. Coffin sang as if he were alone on earth, and the old words rose through the dark as if Isaiah himself had returned to speak for you to God—to speak for God to you. Others in the cell block soon joined. . . . "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light."

It must have been something like that at midnight in the Philippian jail when two followers of the Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, arrested and in chains, started to sing.

How they happened to be in that jail is one of the more interesting stories. Paul and Silas—Jews, followers of Jesus of Nazareth, who they had come to believe was the Christ, the promised Messiah, the Son of God; Christians, although they had probably not yet begun to use that word—had traveled from Palestine, by ship and by foot, west and then north all the way into Europe, north of Greece, to Philippi, a thriving city on the coast of Macedonia. They were there because they believed God wanted them to be there, to tell the story of Jesus, how he had taught and healed, was arrested, tortured, and executed, how he had risen from his grave, was alive and present in the world, and how the world was now a new place, that because of his risen presence, the kingdom of God, the reign of God, was now no longer a dim hope for the far-off future but a present reality, here and now.

A wealthy woman by the name of Lydia heard the story and believed it and was baptized and took Paul and Silas into her home. But it wasn't long until real trouble started. In Philippi there was a girl, a slave girl actually, who everybody knew because she was so different, so peculiar. Everyone said she had an evil spirit , a demon; we would say she was mentally ill. She behaved oddly, unpredictably, said outrageous things, sometimes funny, amusing. If you asked her a question, she always had an answer. If you asked her to predict the future, she'd tell you and it was often pretty funny. In fact, she was so amusing that her owners came up with a great idea: people might pay to have her predict the future. Will Willimon said they rented her out as entertainment for business conventions, set up a fortune-telling and palm-reading booth. She was earning a lot of money for her owners. It was a very happy arrangement, until Paul and Silas came along.

The girl was fascinated with them: started to follow them around, started to shout things about them, some of them controversial, provocative. "These men are slaves of the Most High God!" It was annoying, a real problem. Everywhere they went, every time they tried to start a conversation, there she was, interrupting, shouting. So finally, one day, Paul had had enough

and he shouted back, “Shut up! Stop it! In the name of Jesus Christ, whoever you are—whatever in her, causing this bizarre behavior—come out and go away.” And the stunned girl stopped babbling and shouting and was quiet, still, serene; a smile came over her face. Her demon was gone. Whatever was possessing her, driving her, enslaving her, was gone. And so also was her bizarre behavior, her craziness, her entertainment value. The demon was gone, and so was her owner’s profit.

They are very angry, her owners are, so they drag Paul and Silas to the marketplace, to the magistrate. “These men are disturbing our city: besides they are Jews, not Macedonians. They’re outsiders, outside agitators.” They’re not above invoking a little anti-Semitism and patriotism: “They aren’t our people; they’re probably unregistered aliens.” The crowd is now whipped into a fury and starts to attack Paul and Silas, and as much for their own protection as for punishment, the magistrate orders them beaten and thrown in jail. And that is how they came to be singing hymns in the dark at midnight. And then things really get interesting.

There was an earthquake that night, so severe that the chains around their ankles were dislodged from the wall and the doors were knocked off their hinges. The jailer hurried to the jail to check the damage and discovered about the worst thing that can happen to a warden: a major jail break, prisoners all free, running loose. He’s so distraught and dismayed he is about to fall on his sword. But here comes another voice in the dark. It’s Paul again—not singing, but shouting: “Hold on. Don’t do it. We’re still here. We haven’t gone anywhere.” And the jailer, clearly shaken, asks Paul and Silas what they are all about, why they haven’t run away, I suppose. And the result is that he, the jailer and all his family, are baptized, and he invites Paul and Silas into his home, and they all sit down and have a late night dinner, and they eat and drink and laugh and talk until the wee hours.

The slave girl is free of her demon. Her owners are free of their shameful exploitation of a poor vulnerable girl—and they’re not happy about it. And now the jailer is free, because he’s seen and heard a new truth.

There has been a collision here between the gospel of Jesus Christ and economic self-interest, a business enterprise. Will Willimon imagines the girl’s furious owner saying, “‘We’re not against a little religion—as long as it is kept in its place.’ . . . This is another matter. Religion has somehow gotten mixed up with economics here, and so her owners do what vested interests always do when their interests are threatened” (*Interpretation: Acts*, p. 139).

There is a big issue here that we’re still thinking about and frequently arguing: is Christian religion about the individual or society? Is the purpose of the gospel of Jesus Christ to convert and save the individual or to change

the community? Is it about reforming individual lives or the life of the city? Does this business have social, economic, and political implications? Many say no, that Christianity is personal, about my soul, my relationship with God, my eternal destiny, period. We have learned, mostly tragically, that when religion acts like a civil authority, things don't go well; that religious people are as prone as anyone to behave wrongly, violently, exploitatively; and that there is something about the religious enterprise that becomes nasty when it has its hands on real political power—things like the Inquisition and the Crusades, and witch trials and heretics burned at the stake. And so the founders of this nation made certain that church and state were separated constitutionally, that no religion here will be favored over another, that no one's religious preferences and practices will be forced on others, that no religious test will be required of our officials. And we have over the years protected and celebrated and shown the world the possibilities of religious freedom, this lively experiment in religious liberty. But that is not an answer to the question of whether our religion has economic and political implications.

In fact, deep in our tradition is the conviction that God cares very much not only about the state of the individual soul, but also the life of the community. It is from the beginning, not either-or, but both-and. It is personal and it is corporate, a personal gospel and a social gospel.

The late Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the wisest religious thinkers of our generation, observes that "the Bible insists that God is concerned with everydayness . . . how we manage the marketplace. The Old Testament prophets' concern is not the mysteries of heaven but the delights of society, the affairs of the marketplace." The prophets address "those who trample upon the needy, who increase the price of grain, use dishonest scales, and sell the refuse of corn." Prophetic Judaism, Heschel said, is not as concerned about metaphysics, being and becoming, matter and time, as it is about "widows and orphans, the corruption of judges and affairs of the marketplace" (*I Asked for Wonder,* pp. 79, 88).

Anglican bishop and scholar N. T. Wright, a highly respected conservative, has written a new book, *Simply Christian*, in which he explains that Christianity, growing out of prophetic Judaism, is about God's plan to redeem the world—"the world-put-to-rights," he calls it. The universal human yearning for justice, for elemental fairness, doesn't have to be taught. It is innate. It is the voice of God in every human heart. He writes:

> The point of following Jesus isn't simply so that we can be sure of going to a better place when we die. Our future beyond death is enormously important, but the nature of Christian hope is that it plays back into the present life. We're called, here and now, to be instruments of God's new creation, the world-put-to-rights which has already been launched in

> Jesus and of which Jesus' followers are supposed to be not only its beneficiaries but also agents. (*Simply Christian*, Introduction)

I was in Geneva a few weeks ago for a Consultation with other Presbyterian ministers from around the world and was reminded again that one of the distinguishing characteristics of Calvinism was its insistence that faith is about beliefs and practices, that the love of God for all people is both personal and communal, and that God cares about the state of our souls and also the quality of life in our city and nation. Calvin insisted the gospel had everything in the world to do with public health and education, and safety and justice in the city. And so from African pastors we heard about evangelism and HIV/AIDS education, about theology and accessible birth control and AIDS prevention; from South Africa we heard about opposition and resistance to apartheid and now reconciliation and political healing; and from Hungary we heard about the church's resistance to totalitarian communism and the church's role in the collapse of the Marxist political structure.

Calvin believed that in Jesus Christ the reign of God had actually begun on earth, that it lives inside the worldly political and economic structures, sometimes supporting, sometimes challenging, sometimes critiquing, sometimes resisting—in the name of Jesus Christ.

That is our heritage, our tradition, which the congregation strives to reflect faithfully. So while we may not agree on the specifics of the Big Box ordinance, the matter of a just and living wage is a matter of religious priority for us. And so is health care and public education. And so is the matter of our culture's obsession with violence. I found it quite impossible to think about Paul and Silas freeing that vulnerable young woman from her demons in the name of Jesus Christ and not think about our children and the demon of violence and guns, about young Blair Holt, killed on a CTA bus trying to shield a friend, as a sixteen-year-old gang banger shot at a rival. Blair Holt was the twentieth child, twentieth Chicago Public School student killed by gunfire this year, an unbelievable statistic. I found it impossible not to think about the round-the-clock violence to which we expose our children via television, video games, motion pictures, and having drenched them in it, find it somehow impossible to limit their access to guns, somehow ceding the matter to the National Rifle Association.

The gun the sixteen-year-old shooter used was a 9mm semiautomatic pistol, a killing machine that has nothing to do with hunting, a gun outlawed by the 1994 ban on assault weapons, which Congress and the Administration allowed to expire. That gun is not available in most of the countries of the world. Here it is sold to nearly everyone who wants one. (See *Christian Century,* 29 May 2007, p.5.)

School Superintendent Arne Duncan had it right, I thought, when he said, “Right now we value our right to bear arms more than we value our children.”

The gospel of Jesus Christ is personal. It is about the love of God for you and for me: God’s forgiveness and acceptance and amazing grace. It is about the freedom to live passionately, intentionally, courageously in the promise that nothing will ever separate us from God’s love in Jesus Christ—nothing, not even our own death.

It is personal. But it is also more than personal. It is about God’s precious dream of a world at peace, a dream of justice and fairness for all men and women, a world where children are safe and loved and cared for and protected, a world where there are no outsiders, none excluded on the basis of sexual orientation, no one marginalized because of gender or the color of their skin, a world where love and compassion replace hatred and violence.

It is God’s dream and the hope in which followers of Jesus Christ live, a hope big and bold and beautiful enough to command your love and commitment, your energy, imagination, intelligence, and passion; a dream holy enough to command your life.

I don’t know what the night music was that Paul and Silas sang in jail at midnight. The Bible says they sang a hymn. Although this one wasn’t written until almost 2,000 years later, I’ll bet theirs went something like this:

> Where cross the crowded ways of life
> Where sound the cries of race and clan
> Above the noise of selfish strife
> We hear thy voice, O Son of Man
>
> O Master, from the mountainside
> Make haste to heal these hearts of pain;
> Among these restless throngs abide,
> O tread the city’s streets again.
>
> Till all the world shall learn thy love
> And follow where thy feet have trod
> Till, glorious from thy heaven above,
> Shall come the city of our God.

Amen.